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AUTHOR Cocking, Rodney R.
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ABSTRACT

Addressed are issues and problems of definition that arose in establishing a new scientific journal. Specifically, the problems considered are those confronting the "Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology" (JADP) in its first 5 years of existence. The first matter of definition discussed is the editor's role. Ways in which editorial power was used in attempts to influence the direction of the JADP are traced, and problems in giving definition to a somewhat hybrid field such as applied and developmental psychology are indicated. Three areas considered important for applied developmental research are specified, as are criteria for acceptable applied developmental research. Also discussed are aspects of publishing, including acceptance rates, quality of manuscripts, probability of publication, and factors affecting acceptance/rejection of articles. Concluding remarks delineate impressions of the way the field of applied developmental psychology is perceived. It is recommended that the discipline aim to establish a clearer identity and work to specify problem areas for which little data exist and for which applied developmental analysis could be useful. (RH)

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AN EDITOR'S VIEW OF THE STATE OF APPLIED DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Rodney R. Cocking

Editor

Journal of Applied

Developmental Psychology

APA

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The prepared remarks for this portion of the forum are intentionally brief so as to leave time for directed questions from the audience---not for a lack of material to discuss! I've chosen to address the issues and problems of definitions that arise in establishing a new journal. Specifically, these problems in definitions are those that confronted the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology. And, I must add, that I feel that these issues can really be understood only now that the Journal is 5 years old -- a kind of developmental analysis itself.

I participated in an editors' forum last March and in preparing for that get together I asked some colleagues who had served as consulting editors for JADP about their interpretations of the definition of the editor's role. Invariably, this question was turned around and rhetorically presented to me as "Why is someone an editor, at all?" Before I could protest that this wasn't the question I was interested in, each of these colleagues also provided the answer to their rephrased question: "Why is one an editor? Power!" Now, I often feel overworked, but I seldom feel powerful!

The definition of the roles of an editor, and even the special definitions of "power," really do speak to the heart of the issue I want to discuss: It really is a sort of power to make the decisions about the direction a Journal is to take and there is an implied power-broker mentality of the people who think they can accomplish this, because they hope that their efforts will have the pay-off of giving some direction to the field. I think I speak for both Irv Sigel and myself

when I say that it was a professional goal for each of us to give some direction to the field of applied developmental psychology through the Journal. I think some time, then, ought to be spent discussing the ways in which we thought this might come about.

It seems to me that one of the problems in journal publishing is the high rejection rates of submitted articles. I am inclined to think that the heart of this matter is the author's problem of finding the right journal as an outlet for the work at the outset. Now, as obvious as this may sound, I think the problem is a serious one: maybe the rejection rates wouldn't be so high if the reading audience were identified before the article was committed to paper. In order for the author to make the proper journal selection, there have to be some clear editorial policies spelled out. This is where the Editors wield their so-called power, in the sense that they have the opportunity to give some direction to the field .

The first goal enumerated in the Editorial Policies of JADP is that the journal, through its publication, will endeavor to further the field of applied developmental psychology. The question you might ask, then, is "How?"

Part of the problem in giving definition to a somewhat hybrid field, such as applied and developmental psychology, is to acknowledge, as an editor, that there are certain inherent methodological problems in conducting applied research---the settings for conducting applied research are quite different from lab settings. As an editor, one recognizes that the criteria for

evaluating research that comes from an applied setting are not the same as lab-generated research. Now, while such awareness helps an editor rethink the criteria for judging the merits of the research, there are strong implications for authors, as well. The implication for the author is that an applied discussion tacked onto the end of a report doesn't fill the bill----the research has to be conceived as an applied study... the issue for research investigation must have applied implications.

Thus, in addition to the stated editorial goal of striving to further the field of applied developmental psychology, there is another goal that is related to methods and problems of research: the goal of making the setting of research integral to the research. We hope, in this regard, that the focus on the setting in designing research leads to work with the twin goals of rigor and relevance, to paraphrase Bronfenbrenner. The goals are to achieve the rigor of the laboratory and the relevance of specific settings.

So, in following through on the issue of the appropriate setting as a criterion for applied developmental research, it follows that we look at manuscripts for their reporting of work on the individual in context. Additionally, it is implied by "applied" that we use the focus of investigation as an evaluation criterion; i.e., is it a practical problem? This generally means that we are not looking at an abstract problem in an abstract laboratory setting. How we learn to apply laboratory derived developmental psychology is another issue altogether. By

this particular criterion—the focus of study—we tend to follow Bronfenbrenner's somewhat narrow interpretation of what applied developmental psychology ought to become: systematic research studies in real life settings that have a theoretical rationale driving them. What does such a criterion rule out? To name just a few: (1) case studies; (2) clinical investigations; (3) program descriptions; (4) policy and practice studies that are unrelated to systematic empirical work; (5) professional school studies, such as psychology in business school MBA programs. While the latter is a good example of an applied problem for research, these types of studies are seldom developmental in conception or scope. Thus, both developmental and application criteria are essential and neither one alone is sufficient.

At a Miami sumposium on Applied Developmental Graduate programs a while ago Ellin Scholnick suggested that there ought to be 3 areas represented in applied developmental research. I've alluded to two of these already. They were:

1) How we can apply knowledge gained in the laboratory in evaluating manuscripts. It was in this context that I was suggesting that we usually see the conceptual problems with the research.
2) How the context influences the developing person. In this case, I was suggesting that the methodologies are oftentimes flawed.

A third area, and one that is very important for those of us who are cognitive psychologists and who have had a particilarly tough time thinking through how our work can be applied, is

the study of the application process itself. This area is distinguished from investigations into ways to apply lab-derived research to field studies. The study of the application process deals, not with how we researchers apply research, but how the organism applies its skills and its knowledge. For example, how children dredge up their skills and how they apply what they already know are important, but they imply very different types of developmental studies from research that focuses on how those skills are learned initially. How the child applies knowledge, then, is one important type of applied developmental research. The application process is different at various developmental time points, so the topic is both applied and developmental.

What I have strived to summarize, then, are the features that characterize research as both applied and developmental, and to convey that both sets of features are necessary if the field is to be seen as independent from either applied psychology or from developmental psychology.

Now, in applying these features to the manuscripts that are received at our editorial office, what does this mean with respect to acceptance / rejection rates, or simply in terms of the numbers of manuscripts that are submitted?

In terms of numbers, and percentages first, the range of acceptance of manuscripts for JADP has been 17-23% over the 5-year history of the Journal, averaging about 21% acceptance. These rates are somewhat higher, but comparable to related journals, such as Child Development or Developmental Psychology. The accepted manuscripts have come from a wide array of topic areas and have been of a variety of types. For example, both empirical and experimental studies alike have been accepted; commentary and review articles have also been suitable for publication and appropriate to the mission of the Journal. Whereas a journal like Child Development probably gets in the neighborhood of 1000 articles submitted for review each year, we have had a steadily growing number, to a point where we had about 250 submitted last year and will probably exceed that number this year. Thus, you can see that, while the acceptance rates are similar across the two journals, the probabilities for publication are about 4 times greater in JADP than in CD. I think a few comments should be said about this point.

New journals have a long, up-hill struggle during the first few years in getting quality manuscripts. The identity of the journal is at stake, and while there is a push to get the manuscripts so that there is a product to advertise itself, the quality of the first few issues of that initial volume sets the expectations in the professional audience. So, while there is the push to publish, there is also the pull to restrain publication of lesser quality manuscripts. The net result, I think, is that

the same evaluation standards are employed for the new journal as we have used in reviewing manuscripts for the established outlets. Hence, we end up with comparable acceptance/rejection rates.

The probability of publication issue---the fact that there are fewer submissions to a new Journal---means that people still like to have the prestige of being published in CD or Developmental Psychology. But part and parcel of this argument is my former comment that people need to consider the readership before they write their article for publication. If the article is truly a developmental analysis of an applied problem, in this case, or if it fits the stated objectives of another Journal's Editorial Policies, the article ought to be written to emphasize these critical implications of the research. The by-product of this type of article-planning might be reviews that direct the author to other, similar publication outlets whenever the article is not accepted.

Notice, that I am not suggesting that the acceptance rates will rise by following the Editorial Policies of a Journal. The other factor that affects acceptance and rejection rates involves judgments on the part of Editors: defining the important, interesting, priority areas to publish. This is intimately linked to another reality of publishing: There is a limitation on the number of pages a journal can produce each year. Mavis Heatherington, for example, has pointed out how CD was finally able to expand its number of pages, but that these additional pages have not really kept up with the increase in the number of submissions.

Also, I don't think CD will expand further, so it has achieved its growth limits. So, in spite of the increasingly better quality of manuscripts, the page limits are the same. We might expect, then, for acceptance rates actually to decline in the future on this basis!

As Editors and founders of the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology we have been in a unique position to ascertain the way the field of applied developmental psychology is perceived. The diversity of submissions, the format of discussions, and the studies themselves have provided a large sample of interpretations of the field. Within each of these articles, there have been implicit and explicit statements of just what "applied" means in the developmental field.

Our initial impression has been that there is a lack of clarity as to what application involves; there is a lack of creation of innovative or particular models for driving such research; and there is a lack of field-generated research studies. The source of problems selected for study appear to be theory-driven, but the implications for practice do not seem to be directed, in the written text, to field workers or policy makers who look to the researchers to provide new answers that have supporting data.

So, while applied developmental psychology is alive and well, one objective ought to be to establish a clearer identity. One beginnirg might be through graduate and post-graduate courses

that aim at a clearer picture, better understanding, and more coherent interpretations of just what applied developmental psychology is or can become. Another objective ought to be to identify specific topics for which there are few data and where applied developmental analyses can provide useful answers or approaches to the problems. The next time we meet to discuss the subject, I hope that my task will be to report the changing perceptions of Applied Developmental Psychology.... and that there will be some to report.